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U.S. Public Health Service

What representative citizens think about...

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What Representative Citizens Think About Prostitution

Issued by
THE U. S. PUBLIC HEALTH SERVICE
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WHAT REPRESENTATIVE CITIZENS THINK ABOUT PROSTITUTION AND THE TREATMENT OF PROSTITUTES.

The United States Public Health Service, with the cooperation of various State boards of health, recently sent out a questionnaire on the subject of prostitution to the mayors of large cities. Five copies of the questionnaire were sent to each mayor. He was requested to distribute these, one to the president of the chamber of commerce, one to a bank president, one to the president of a women's organization, one to the chief of police, and one to a representative citizen of his own selection.

The letter which accompanied these questionnaires not only invited a frank expression of opinion, but also offered, as an additional inducement to frankness, the opportunity for omitting the name, if the individual so desired.

A total of 554 questionnaires were returned from 212 cities. The classification of these replies, according to occupation, follows:

Presidents of chambers of commerce	83
Presidents of banks	89
Women	73
Chiefs of police	124
Representative citizens	185
Total	554

I.

The first question asked was as follows:

The Public Health Service and the State boards of health believe that open houses of prostitution are a menace to public health and should be abolished in every community. Do you agree with this point of view? (Yes or no.) Why?

The replies to this question were:

Yes	491
No	45
Conditional	13
Did not answer	5

It is significant to note that among the 491 who voted "Yes," 106 were chiefs of police, and that only 15 chiefs of police did not subscribe to the public health point of view. One police chief answered

that he agreed "because open houses of prostitution breed disease, crime, increase the number of prostitutes, corrupt the morals of the community, and are a menace to the youth of the country." Another, "The only reason I have ever heard advanced in favor of houses of prostitution is that they protect innocent girls. I am opposed to sacrificing any woman to benefit others." Another, "Yes. The prostitute is one of the greatest menaces to any community, and why leave an avenue open for young men and women to ruin their lives, as well as those of children yet unborn." Another, "Yes. Because it is the principal cause of the spread of venereal disease."

One hundred and sixty-four representative citizens, among them mayors, city attorneys, dentists, real estate agents, traveling salesmen, merchants, manufacturers, lawyers, and judges, voted "Yes," as against 15 opposed. A citizen of California answered, "Yes. Inmates of houses of prostitution can not be successfully examined for venereal diseases. Also, the open house creates a demand that must be filled by our young girls. Segregation does not segregate." Another, a citizen of Florida, replied, "Yes. Because open houses of prostitution put the State in the position of authorizing and protecting vice, and this should no more be done than to establish a zone in the cities in which murder may lawfully be committed."

From a banker in Minnesota came the reply, "Yes. Advancing civilization has demonstrated the weakness of the old theory, and there is no valid argument in favor of prostitution."

These replies are typical of the 491.

II.

The second question dealt with the alternative point of view:

Or do you believe that there should be open houses of prostitution in your city? (Yes or no.) Why?

The replies to this question were:

No	480
Yes	41
Conditional	11
Did not answer	22

Of 124 chiefs of police replying to this question, only 14 favored open houses of prostitution, as against 106 opposed to such houses.

The following are a few of the typical replies of representative citizens to this question:

No. Prostitution is *not* a necessary evil; hence why encourage its growth or maintenance?—*Indiana citizen.*

No. Because no way has yet been devised whereby such places can be controlled to such an extent as to prevent the spread of disease.—*Minnesota citizen.*

No. As well favor gambling, open schools for crime, and criminals of all classes.—*Nebraska citizen.*

No. They are disease spreaders and a disgrace to any city.—*Rhode Island banker.*

The representative of a women's organization in New Jersey wrote, "No. To accomplish our aim, which is the health of our Nation, drastic abolishment of every institution which is the nucleus of the social diseases should be sought." Two hundred club women in the State of Washington answered through their representative, "No. Experience in our home city shows a reduction of the evil since the red-light district was closed." The representative of another women's organization in Indiana replied, "No. Chiefly because I have three girls and two boys. These houses must draw from some mother's children—why not mine? If open houses are tolerated we countenance them and sanction their place in society."

III.

The third question was as follows:

Or do you believe that there should be a segregated district in which prostitutes should be allowed to ply their trade? (Yes or no.) Why?

The replies to this question were:

No	446
Yes	67
Conditional	31
Did not answer	10

In considering the answers to this question it is again important to note that 102 chiefs of police voted "No," against 16 voting in favor of the segregated district, and the reasons advanced by those opposed to the segregated district lend additional significance to the figures.

Some of the characteristic replies indicative of changed public sentiment are as follows:

The worst possible policy that could be tolerated in any city with which I am acquainted is segregation.—*City attorney, Indiana.*

No. Because the worst form of open houses is the so-called segregated district, which advertises itself and is considered legal because tolerated. It ruins the contiguous property and contaminates the neighborhood. It is not segregated, but is located in a certain part of the city.—*Representative, Missouri Chamber of Commerce.*

No. No legalized connivance with crime. Don't make it easy; make it HARD! "Vice seen too often face to face, we first endure, then pity, then embrace."—*Massachusetts banker.*

As reasonably segregate smallpox or diphtheria and allow those who frequent the segregated district to cohabit with the victims and, returning, mingle with their intimates without disinfection.—*Pennsylvania banker.*

No. A segregated district never segregates. It may segregate some women, but it never segregates the men who carry infection to the innocent.—*Representative, women's organization, Georgia.*

No. Believe in virtue, not vice.—*Massachusetts citizen.*

No. Moral leprosy should be eliminated, not segregated.—*New Hampshire citizen.*

No. The segregated district is a temptation for somebody's boy and a snare for somebody's daughter.—*North Dakota citizen.*

To segregate implies the right to carry on prostitution in the district, and it is no more justifiable than would be a segregated district for gamblers.—*Nebraska citizen.*

No. They have proven impracticable.—*Massachusetts chief of police.*

No. Don't believe in segregated crime.—*Missouri chief of police.*

No. They are places for breeding of diseases and making of criminals.—*Massachusetts chief of police.*

No. Might as well segregate murder.—*Pennsylvania chief of police.*

No. Because from my experience, a segregated district does not segregate and is like a contagious disease and spreads all over.—*New York chief of police.*

No. Because for 32 years I have been on the police corps and have seen so much I hope I will never see houses of prostitution open again.—*Virginia chief of police.*

These replies would indicate how unwarrantable are the fears recently expressed by some that postwar opinion was tending to favor a return to the prewar tolerance of the segregated district. Public opinion has not alone been changed; the public has been educated in the process.

IV.

The fourth question asked was:

Do you believe all prostitutes and their patrons should be treated alike (subjected to thorough medical examination to ascertain if they have a communicable disease, and if found infected, placed under strict surveillance until disease is no longer communicable)? (Yes or no.) Why?

Replies to this question were as follows:

Yes	487
No	26
Conditional	14
Did not answer	27

Of the number answering "Yes," 114 were chiefs of police. Only three of these chiefs answered "No." One gave as his reason for answering "Yes," "I believe that the diseases which prostitutes and their patrons have are more dangerous to the public than smallpox and still we quarantine smallpox." Another, "No rules can be too strict in this matter, as the health of some innocent person may be affected by coming in contact with a person having a venereal disease."

The representative of a Massachusetts women's organization, in answering "Yes," gave as her reason, "Morality and health of the

public have no sex." Another, "Female prostitutes rarely marry, but male prostitutes do marry, usually a pure girl. She and her children are the sufferers."

"The public good requires that every possible means should be employed to cure and prevent the spread of venereal disease," wrote a New York banker.

Another banker in North Carolina answered, "Yes. Treat them all alike. Treat 'em rough. Do anything to rid the country of them." The same idea may perhaps have lodged in the mind of a mayor of a Nebraska city, who wrote, "I fight them all—try to run them out of this city and I am *not* running a sanitarium for prostitutes and pimps."

V.

The last question was:

Or do you believe that only female prostitutes should be so treated? (Yes or no.) Why?

The answers to this question were:

No	429
Yes	21
Conditional	9
Did not answer	95

On this question, 101 chiefs of police voted unanimously "No." Women's organizations voted 67 "No" to 1 "Yes." The largest number of those voting "Yes" was found among the representative citizens, but here the vote stood "Yes" 14, "No" 142.

A sergeant of police gave as his reason for answering "No," "I do not believe in establishing one standard for women and another for men along this line." A chief of police, "No. Because both sexes can spread venereal disease." Another chief of police, "No. A square deal for all and special privileges for none."

"I believe that the suppression of the venereal diseases is the paramount duty of the nation to-day," wrote a banker. Another banker, "The idea of scorning a girl that has fallen and winking at a man because he got away with it is, to my mind, at the bottom of much of the evil. Both are human, and if it is wrong for one sex it is wrong for the other."

A representative citizen of North Carolina wrote, "No. You are particularly fortunate in your term 'female prostitute.' If public sentiment could only be educated to take this view of it and look upon the patron as a prostitute also, a great step forward would have been taken." The representative of another women's organization in Massachusetts wrote, "No. If only one were to be examined and treated it should be the patron, since the prostitute harms only the patron, while the patron may harm numbers of innocent women and children."

"Both," wrote a Massachusetts merchant. "I see no reason for any favoritism. It's a poor rule that won't work both ways. I am not strong on the 'woman tempted me.' I believe the man helps 60 per cent to his own fall."

"Why discriminate?" asked a president of a chamber of commerce. "The patron is as much a menace as the prostitute." "What has sex to do with the problem?" inquired the secretary of a commercial club, and a Minnesota chief of police answered "No. Why? Fool question."

The replies quoted above are typical of those received.

VI.

The 8.1 per cent which disagreed with the point of view of the Public Health Service on the first question can be briefly dismissed. They advanced as their reasons, with almost invariable iteration, the shop-worn arguments which experience in dealing with the problem of prostitution has disproved. "Houses of prostitution are necessary evils." "Prostitution is a necessity." "Without prostitution some good girl would be ruined." "Medical supervision and periodical inspection is the practical solution." "The segregated district decreases crime by enabling police supervision of a recognized crime center." "Safeguards against sex perversion by providing an outlet for the unrestricted appetites of men." "Protects boys and young men from contact with the prostitutes by removing temptation from the streets and residential district." "Decreases prostitution by regulation." "Protects the community from demoralizing and detrimental proximity of prostitution." "Decreases graft in connection with prostitution and the exploiting of prostitutes."

The obvious fatuity of the arguments advanced by this small minority does not warrant the allotment of additional space to quotations.

VII.

A large number of those replying supplemented their answers with letters. These are worthy of quotation at length. Limitation of space, however, prevents the inclusion of more than a few excerpts.

A representative citizen of Georgia said in part: "Since the time the Government, on account of Macon's proximity to Camp Wheeler, closed up the segregated district here, there has been, as far as I am able to learn, far less prostitution and disease than before. No one whose opinion is worth considering desires a return to the old conditions. Perhaps real-estate speculators, a few of them, may, but public sentiment, on the whole, is against it. Conditions are still open to criticism, but formerly they were vile."

"The Government venereal disease clinic did great good here and it is a thousand pities that there is not a clinic for venereal diseases in every community."

"What our people need is education along these lines, in addition to the religious training which homes and churches all too seldom give about personal purity."

"A Government lecturer came to Macon once with a set of slides about venereal disease, and many men remember to this day what they then learned. Courses of lectures at frequent intervals would be of utmost value."

"I have always tried to be a he-man," wrote the president of a chamber of commerce, "but frankly, that kind of a debasing influence which a segregated district throws around it will always hold a city down."

If encouragement were needed by public health officers, it could be found in plenty in some of these letters. "This is a great move in the right direction," wrote an Ohio banker, "no other disease known to the human race does so much damage," and the owner of a department store in an Ohio city said, "More power to the educational activities of your department."

It remained for a superintendent of police in a Nebraska city to sound the call to high endeavor:

"We must face this problem resolutely, frankly, and fearlessly, molding public sentiment as we go, but never turning back on the program started by the Government during the war."

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